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the First Easter

(Continued)

Jesus' Mother, held it briefly in her arms and wept over it. The servants wrapped the broken body in fine linen, placed it in a litter, and, followed by old Joseph and Mary and a few women, carried the litter with its silent burden to the lonely spot where the sepulcher waited.

THE DARK red sun was falling in the west, and the hills stood against the fiery sky. Joseph knew they must hurry. This was the holy season of the Passover and, after sunset, it would be the Sabbath and no one could have anything to do with the dead. The procession quickened its pace, weeping, not glancing at the yellowish and twisting walls of Jerusalem behind which the Sabbath lights would soon be shining in every house.

The white sepulcher, carved out of solid rock, was waiting. The women looked within and saw the wide white shelf on which the body would be placed. They looked at each other timidly, for this was a very grand tomb. The servants gently removed the long, slender body and laid it on the shelf. There was no priest present to say prayers for the dead, so Joseph, his face noble with its beard, bent and said the prayers. The women wept. Mary looked with mysterious intensity at the sky, and her pale and beautiful face was illuminated.

A mighty stone stood at one side, ready to be rolled across the entrance to the tomb. Joseph and his servants waited while the women hurried away for spices and ointments to anoint the dead; it was close to sunset. Within a short time, the women returned, lifted away the linen, and anointed the body so dead and so broken. Then, weeping again, they departed for the city to prepare for the Sabbath. The sun stood on the western mountain like a red shield, then slowly disappeared. Joseph's servants, struggling and sweating, pushed the heavy stone across the opening of the tomb.

It was all over. Darkness began to sweep over the desert place, and jackals barked at a distance. In the city, every door and window blazed with Sabbath lights. But here in this place was only the desolation of a closed, mute sepulcher, its shadow sharp and black on the crumbling earth.

Dawn came, but no one visited the tomb—not an apostle, not a disciple. No one was there except for the birds wheeling through sudden little golden dust storms. No one kept guard in this isolated spot.

AT LAST, it was the end of the Sabbath. Just before the sun set, the soldiers and their centurion arrived, marching smartly. They looked at the great white tomb disgustedly. What was there to guard here but a dead man? He was supposed to rise from the dead, was he? Laughing and grumbling, the soldiers stared at the tomb. The centurion did not stop them; soldiers were permitted to grumble at all times, except before civilians. It was the privilege of all soldiers everywhere.

The soldiers watched their officer carefully, noting his air of despondency and sadness. He was a young man like themselves, and he was known for his good temper and gaiety. When alone with his men, he joined in their games. But now he was grave, his face drawn and haggard. Ah, yes, he had been present at the crucifixion of the Jew, and there were many rumors. The soldiers had seen the darkness and had felt the earthquake at their posts in the city, but they had thought the first a dust storm and the second

only a natural event. Had the centurion learned something they did not know?

What were they to do all through the night? the young soldiers asked the centurion.

"Watch," he said.

Watch the tomb of a dead man! But still, there had been those rumors that the followers of the Nazarene would attempt to take away the body and then proclaim that it had risen from the dead. Superstition! Craftiness. One of the soldiers tried to stir the stone. He could not even budge it. Others tried, and failed. It would take many strong men to roll it aside.

It was the eve of the third day. It had been hot all day, but with darkness it began to turn cold. The jackals had taken up their wild lament again. They carried rabies with them, so the soldiers rapidly built a number of fires to keep them away. The men began to sing as they put pots on the fire for their evening meal and set out their wine and earthen goblets. This was a most desolate place: they needed all their high spirits to last them through the long watches of the night. They talked of their wives in distant Rome, or of their sweethearts in Jerusalem, and one or two of the older men spoke of their children. They cursed and made jokes. The steam and fragrance of their meat filled the moon-bright air. Perhaps it would not be too bad after all.

The centurion, unlike his usual way, sat apart at the edge of the firelight. He looked steadily at the stone sealing the entrance to the tomb. Red light flickered on it, and the moon crowned the top of the sepulcher. The centurion's heart was in a turmoil. He did not know what to expect. Perhaps nothing. Surely nothing, he assured himself. It was all superstition. But when his subaltern brought him his supper, he found himself without appetite. He drank only a little wine. He was at once tired and very tense.

Metal plates clattered and knives made sharp sounds as the soldiers ate and drank. They began to tell rude jokes

and laughed louder and louder. After their meal, they built the fires higher and started to play dice. They cursed their luck, yawned, scratched themselves. They were accustomed to night watches. Soon they would divide themselves up so that some could sleep as others watched.

HALF THE MEN removed their helmets, wrapped blankets about themselves, and lay down, snoring immediately. Firelight fell on their ruddy faces, picked out sparkles on the hilts of their swords and from their breast armor. The other half of the watch, in deference to their sleeping comrades, played more quietly and tended the fires. The moon rose higher. The centurion waited, weariness heavy upon him. He alone could not sleep. It was not permitted an officer, unless another officer was present.

Then the soldiers who were on guard prodded their companions, and the sleepers sat up, yawning and complaining that they had fallen asleep only a moment ago. They put on their helmets and looked to their swords. They had long forgotten the tomb in which lay the dead Jew. It was only another watch. A silly one. The subaltern came to the centurion and filled his wine goblet. He was concerned at his officer's somber expression and asked if he were sick. The centurion silently shook his head.

The centurion watched the moon sloping down the sky. He turned his head to the east. Very soon now, the first



Mr. and Mrs. Marcus Reback (she is Taylor Caldwell) relax at home.

(Continued)